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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 004144

SIPDIS

STATE PASS TO AIT/W, INR/EAP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/11/2025

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [TW](#)

SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTION SCENESETTER: PINGTUNG COUNTY

REF: TP 4043

Classified By: AIT Director Douglas Paal, Reason(s): 1.4 (B/D).

1. (C) SUMMARY. PINGTUNG, IN TAIWAN'S SOUTHEAST CORNER, IS SET FOR A THREE-WAY BATTLE DOMINATED BY AN INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE ON A SPENDING SPREE AND BY THE INVISIBLE FORCE OF KMT CHAIRMAN MA YING-JEOU. IN AN UNUSUAL MOVE THAT SPURRED AN EARLY BEGINNING TO THE RACE, PRO-KMT INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE SOONG LI-HUA, WIFE OF INDEPENDENT LY MEMBER TSAI HAO, BEGAN PASTING CAMPAIGN POSTERS AROUND THE COUNTY, PUTTING UP BILLBOARDS, AND SENDING OUT ROVING CAMPAIGN LOUDSPEAKER TRUCKS EN MASSE. THIS EARLY CAMPAIGNING WITH ITS ACCOMPANYING DEEP POCKETS HAS PUT BOTH THE DPP AND KMT ON THE DEFENSIVE, EFFECTIVELY DRAINING THE CAMPAIGN COFFERS OF BOTH PARTIES, WHO CLAIM SOONG IS MORE INTERESTED IN THE THEATER OF CAMPAIGNING THAN IN POLITICS. THE DPP, WHICH SEES NO LOCAL ISSUES TO GALVANIZE VOTERS, HAS BECOME A PUNCHING BAG FOR BOTH SOONG AND THE KMT CANDIDATE, BOTH OF WHOM ARE BLAMING THE POOR ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN PINGTUNG ON THE CHEN ADMINISTRATION. BOTH PARTIES SEE THE "MA YING-JEOU" EFFECT AS HAVING A CHANCE TO TIP THE BALANCE OF THE ELECTION AND ARE FORMING THEIR CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES TO EITHER AVOID OR ENHANCE THIS EFFECT. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE SOONG LI-HUA, WIFE OF POPULAR INDEPENDENT LEGISLATOR TSAI HAO, HELD A SEPTEMBER 26 CAMPAIGN RALLY IN PINGTUNG CITY WITH 20,000 FEMALE SUPPORTERS FROM THE 33 TOWNSHIPS OF PINGTUNG COUNTY. SOONG POINTED OUT AT THE RALLY THAT RECENT POLLING RESULTS SHOW SHE HAS THE MOST SUPPORT FROM FEMALE VOTERS AND FROM UNDECIDED VOTERS. SHE CHARGED THAT UNDER THE COUNTY'S DPP ADMINISTRATION, COUNTY RESIDENTS HAVE SUFFERED FROM SERIOUS UNEMPLOYMENT FOR EIGHT YEARS AND IT'S TIME FOR A CHANGE. DPP OPERATIVES SEE THIS ENTIRE EVENT AS MERE THEATER BEING USED IN AN ATTEMPT TO MOBILIZE PEOPLE TO CREATE PRESSURE ON THE DPP AND THE KMT.

3. (C) BOTH THE KMT AND DPP HAVE DOWNPLAYED THIS SOONG RALLY, INDICATING THAT A FREE BUS TICKET TO PINGTUNG CITY FROM THE OUTLYING TOWNSHIPS COUPLED WITH A FREE LUNCH WOULD BE ENOUGH INCENTIVE TO GET LOTS OF PEOPLE TO COME OUT FOR A RALLY. THE DPP ESCALATED ITS ATTACKS AGAINST SOONG'S CAMPAIGN SPENDING AND BEGAN TO ALLEGE VOTE-BUYING AS EVIDENCED BY EXPENSIVE "GIFTS" GIVEN TO SOONG SUPPORTERS AS PART OF A LOTTERY RUN OUT OF HER CAMPAIGN OFFICE. MORE THAN 70 SOONG SUPPORTERS WERE QUESTIONED BY PROSECUTORS, AND ONE OF HER CORE CAMPAIGN STAFFERS WAS DETAINED ON OCTOBER 6TH. IN A MOVE TO GET OUT THE SYMPATHY VOTE, A TEARFUL, BUT TELEGENIC, SOONG CHARGED THAT SHE WAS BEING PERSECUTED BY TWO RIVAL CANDIDATES AND THAT THIS AFFRONT WILL ONLY MAKE HER RESOLVE STRONGER. ON OCTOBER 5, SOONG HERSELF IGNORED A SUBPOENA BY PROSECUTORS TO APPEAR FOR QUESTIONING. SHE EXCUSED HERSELF AS REQUIRED TO ATTEND COUNTY COUNCIL MEETINGS. HOWEVER, THE OCTOBER 7 ADJOURNMENT OF THE PINGTUNG COUNTY COUNCIL, OF WHICH SOONG IS A MEMBER, PAVES THE WAY FOR THE COUNTY PROSECUTORS TO INTERVIEW SOONG DIRECTLY REGARDING THE VOTE-BUYING CHARGES. PROSECUTORS REISSUED A SUBPOENA ON OCTOBER 11 TO REQUIRE SOONG TO APPEAR FOR QUESTIONING. BOTH DPP AND KMT POLITICAL OBSERVERS ALSO COMPLAINED THAT SOONG LI-HUA'S CANDIDACY IS NOTHING BUT A FRONT TO TEST THE WATER FOR HER HUSBAND TO RUN IN THE NEXT MAGISTRATE ELECTION.

4. (C) CHAIRMAN MA YING-JEOU HAS STATED PUBLICLY HE WILL NOT NEGOTIATE WITH SOONG TO GET HER TO PULL OUT OF THE RACE. PRIVATELY OBSERVERS SPECULATE MA BELIEVES IT IS TOO LATE TO "BUY" HER OUT BY OFFERING REIMBURSEMENT IN SOME FORM FOR HER HEAVY CAMPAIGN EXPENSES. OF COURSE, GIVEN THAT SOONG'S CAMPAIGN IS NOW IN A STATE OF SEIGE BY PROSECUTORS, THE ALLEGATIONS OF VOTE BUYING MAY DRIVE HER OUT OF THE RACE. DESPITE REPEATED ATTEMPTS BY AIT/K TO CONTACT SOONG'S CAMPAIGN OFFICE IN PINGTUNG, AN ASSISTANT TOLD US THERE WAS NO ONE THERE DESIGNATED AS CAMPAIGN MANAGER WHO COULD ANSWER OUR QUESTIONS. AN AIT/K CONTACT INDICATED THAT GIVEN THE EVENTS OF LAST WEEK, PINGTUNG RESIDENTS MAY NOW BE AFRAID TO CAMPAIGN FOR SOONG.

5. (C) ON SEPTEMBER 29, 2005, AIT/K CALLED ON LEE SHIH-BING, THE DPP CHAIRPERSON FOR PINGTUNG COUNTY. LEE'S COMMENTS MIRRORED THE DPP STRATEGY REPORTED REFTEL OF "COMPENSATING FOR THE PARTY'S CREDIBILITY DEFICIT BY FOCUSING" ON INDIVIDUAL RECORDS AND APPEAL TO VOTERS. ITS OWN POLLS SHOW THAT THE DPP CANDIDATE, TSAO CHI-HUNG, HAS THE LEAD BY FIVE

PERCENTAGE POINTS. HOWEVER, THAT LEAD LENDS NO COMFORT WHEN 33 PER CENT OF VOTERS CHARACTERIZE THEMSELVES AS UNDECIDED. WHILE CAMPAIGNING FOR A MAGISTERIAL ELECTION USUALLY BEGINS ONLY FIVE WEEKS OUT FROM THE ELECTION, THIS IS THE FIRST THAT HAD SUCH AN EARLY START DUE TO SOONG LI-HUA'S MASSIVE SPENDING CAMPAIGN TO BUILD SUPPORT FOR HER INDEPENDENT CANDIDACY. IN THIS THREE-WAY RACE, THE DPP IS TERRIFIED OF A ONE-ON-ONE WITH EITHER KMT'S WANG, WHO HAS BEEN A POPULAR MAYOR IN PINGTUNG CITY, OR WITH THE NEW FACE OF INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE SOONG LI-HUA.

16. (C) THE SAME DAY, IN A CALL ON CHUNG CHIA-PIN, EXECUTIVE SECRETARY TO THE DPP CAMPAIGN OFFICE FOR CANDIDATE TSAO

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CHI-HUNG. CHUNG ADMITTED THE DPP WOULD BE RUNNING SCARED IN PINGTUNG COUNTY IF THIS WERE A ONE-ON-ONE ELECTION WITH EITHER THE KMT CANDIDATE OR THE PRO-KMT INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE. HOWEVER, THEY ARE ENCOURAGED BY THE POSSIBILITY OF PAN-BLUE SUPPORTERS SPLITTING THEIR VOTES AND BELIEVES THAT BODES WELL FOR TSAO. CHUNG ALSO STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF TRYING TO KEEP VOTER TURN OUT LOW. THE DPP IS ALSO CONCERNED ABOUT THE MA YING-JEOU EFFECT GIVEN THAT THE BAD PERFORMANCE OF THE CENTRAL DPP ADMINISTRATION HAS COLORED THE REPUTATION OF THE ENTIRE PARTY. IN PINGTUNG COUNTY, CHUNG SAYS, THE MA EFFECT WILL HAVE SIGNIFICANCE IF THE PEOPLE ARE ENCOURAGED BY THE HEAVY MEDIA COVERAGE OF MA'S PRESIDENTIAL ASPIRATIONS TO MAKE THE LOCAL ELECTION A PRECURSOR TO THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION. THIS WILL FOCUS THE VOTERS ON REFORM AND CHANGE FROM THE CURRENT ADMINISTRATION, WHICH WILL NEGATIVELY AFFECT THE DPP CANDIDATE TSAO. THE DPP, CHUNG SAYS, IS TRYING IN ALL THE 3 IN 1 ELECTIONS TO FOCUS ON THE LOCAL CANDIDATE AND AWAY FROM THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT'S PERFORMANCE IN ORDER TO AVOID THE MA EFFECT.

17. (C) AIT/K CALLED ALSO ON TSAI SHU-YA, THE KMT COUNTY CHAIRPERSON. THE KMT CANDIDATE WANG CHIN-SHIH IS THE INCUMBENT PINGTUNG CITY MAYOR, WHO HAS BENEFITED FROM HIS GOOD PERFORMANCE IN OFFICE. TSAI SAID KMT'S OWN POLLS SHOW WANG IS TRAILING TSAO BY LESS THAN 1 PER CENT. THE KMT IS CONFIDENT THAT SOONG LI-HUA WILL NOT SPLIT THE VOTE AND THAT PEOPLE WILL, AT THE LAST MINUTE, SWITCH TO THE STRONGEST PAN-BLUE CANDIDATE WHO CAN WIN THE ELECTION RATHER THAN VOTE ON PRINCIPLE FOR A LOSER (THIS IS KNOWN AS THE "QIBAO" OR "DUMP AND PROTECT" EFFECT). THE KMT CHAIRMAN MA YING-JEOU HAS ALREADY BEEN TO PINGTUNG IN AN EARLY SHOWING OF SUPPORT FOR ITS CANDIDATE AND, ACCORDING TO TSAI, MA PLANS ANOTHER SWEEP INTO PINGTUNG TO URGE KMT VOTERS TO GET TO THE POLLS IF THEY WANT TO PRESS FOR CHANGE DUE TO DISAPPOINTMENT WITH THE CHEN ADMINISTRATION'S PERFORMANCE. THE KMT CLEARLY VIEWS THE 3 IN 1 ELECTIONS AS AN INDICATOR OF MA YING-JEOU'S POPULARITY AND HIS POTENTIAL FOR WINNING THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL RACE.

18. (C) COMMENT. SOONG'S CURRENT DIFFICULTIES HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO PLAY IN HER FAVOR OR AGAINST HER, DEPENDING ON WHETHER OR NOT THE PROSECUTORS PRESS CHARGES. IN THE MEANTIME, PINGTUNG'S DPP SEES ITSELF AS THE LUCKY RECIPIENT OF THE ENTRY OF AN INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE WHO PROMISES TO SPLIT THE PAN-BLUE VOTE. THE DPP IS BANKING ON THAT SPLIT TO TAKE THE MAGISTERIAL SEAT WHILE, AT THE SAME TIME, TRYING TO PLAY UP LOCAL POLITICS AND THE INDIVIDUAL CANDIDATES IN ORDER TO AVOID THE ISLAND-WIDE DISAPPOINTMENT WITH THE CHEN ADMINISTRATION. THE KMT, ON THE OTHER HAND, DISMISSIVE OF THE INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE'S PROSPECTS, ARE HANGING ON TIGHTLY TO MA YING-JEOU'S COATTAILS. END COMMENT.  
PAAL